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Women "Reading the World:" Challenging Welfare Reform in Wisconsin

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The latest iteration of welfare reform, the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), endorses work requirements and time limits on benefits, while giving greater discretion to individual states in developing welfare programs. Linking personal responsibility with work indicates that policy makers believe that it only takes proper guidance and minimal training for welfare recipients (predominately women) to make the transition from welfare to work. We suggest, however, that focusing on incentive, sanction, or compulsion ignores the structural features of poverty, especially as they impact the multiplicities of poor women's lives. In order for the welfare system to deal with women on their own terms, there must be a reconceptualization of the type of knowledge women require. Thus we argue for the development of a more critical literacy among welfare recipients so that they can uncover the (limited) options and alternatives available to them under current welfare reform programs. Wisconsin's latest welfare reform program, Wisconsin Works (W-2), is the model used to demonstrate the extent to which such programs fail to address the needs of women as they attempt the transition from welfare to work.

The latest iteration of welfare reform, the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), endorses work requirements, time limits on benefits,

measures to discourage women from having children while receiving benefits, and greater discretion for individual states in developing and implementing welfare programs. The solidarity of the 104th Congress in passing this legislation reflects the fear of many Americans that welfare has become the way of life for too many individuals. Linking personal responsibility with work indicates that policy makers believe that it only takes proper guidance and minimal training for welfare recipients (predominantly women) to become self-sufficient.

It is apparent from the language of the bill that one of the main purposes of welfare reform is to eliminate perceived personal weaknesses that hinder individuals from supporting themselves and their families. We suggest, however, that focusing on incentive, sanction, or compulsion as a way to alter behavior deemed unacceptable ignores the economic, political and social flaws that produce poverty. Distanced from the discussion are the structural aspects of poverty that are generated from our current economic and political arrangements, as well as the de-skilling and elimination of jobs, and systematic racism and sexism (Hull, 1993, p. 28). This is not surprising as policy debates occur far from the economic, political, and geo-social spaces occupied by welfare recipients.

We agree with many of the arguments supporting the structural thesis (see Abramovitz, 1992; Pearce, 1993; Piven, 1995). We realize, however, that current welfare reform initiatives are framed by an ideology that defines poverty as a pathological condition affecting the individual. It is apparent that the welfare system has its own characteristic ways of interpreting women's needs as evidenced by the ongoing debate about how welfare should be transplanted with work (see Murray, 1984; Mead, 1992). For this reason we suggest that there are two ways to phrase the "welfare question:" first, and the more narrow of the two, is how do we move poor women off the welfare rolls thus, reducing welfare expenditure and "dependency?" Second, and more broadly, how do we improve the quality of life for single mothers and their children and help these families move beyond poverty? Policy makers are focusing on the former while stating that new reforms will accomplish the latter.

Regardless of which question we choose to address, the analysis of poor women and their families must occur within the

context of employment and the need for child care, health care, and housing. The intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and space must also be explored as they affect poverty (Sidel, 1986; Amott & Matthaei, 1991; Pearce, 1993, Mulroy, 1995). These issues are manifested in the pressures faced by poor women such as crowding, segregation, high crime rates, deterioration of public services and infrastructure, an overabundance of low wage labor, and the geographic mismatch in urban and rural areas between the location of any job. None of the future initiatives that individual states will develop and implement under the auspices of this latest reform legislation will be successful unless policies and regulations address these structural issues. Even more critical is the need to recognize that the move from welfare to work requires an understanding of how women negotiate their worlds of work, family, community, and school. If the welfare system is to deal with women on their own terms, there must be a reconceptualization of the type of knowledge that women need to make this transition.

To that end, this paper will first posit a more holistic definition of knowledge which articulates the distinction between ideology and the reality of women's lives. We suggest that assisting single mothers to seek education and training that has as a beginning point the realities of their daily lives, and whose purpose is to produce knowledge in the context of action, will enable them to develop the skills necessary to participate in the economic, political, and socio-cultural aspects of their communities (see Fasheh, 1990). In this way, they will be able to uncover alternatives and options, allowing for greater identification and access of community resources. Thus, there is a need to foster critical thinking, which becomes more than a reading of the word, but a "reading of the world" (Friere & Macedo, 1987; also see Freire, 1970; McLaren, 1988; McCaleb, 1994).

Second, we outline the welfare demonstration project recently enacted by the state of Wisconsin: "Wisconsin Works" (W-2). This policy initiative is being heralded by policy makers as the prototype for other states who must develop individual programs as mandated by PRWORA. Federal responsibility for providing cash assistance for poor children has shifted to block grants that will fund each state's specific welfare and work programs. Any welfare monies received are tied to the work efforts of the

parent(s), not the financial needs of the child. We chose to evaluate Wisconsin's program not only because of its high visibility but because this state is committed to quickly enacting the program state-wide and already has many of the program components in place.

Third, although we find fault with a welfare reform ideology that focuses on the individual as the root cause of poverty and dependency, we realize that we are working within a policy arena that is not likely to shift its emphasis in the near future. Given these emphases, we are fearful, however, that when welfare rolls do not decrease as quickly as policy makers and administrators anticipate, when women slip in and out of work, or when women are not able to be gainfully employed at the end of the imposed time limits, welfare recipients themselves will be blamed for their inability to move from welfare to work. Only by understanding how single mothers interface with their world will we truly be able to ensure that welfare benefits become less important to the financial support of poor women and their families. The first step in this process would be to incorporate the life experiences of welfare recipients into the knowledge base that informs policy. Next, policies and programs should be designed and implemented that would assist poor women in developing better and more effective survival strategies for themselves and their families. Thus, we offer an analysis of various segments of W-2 framed by this concept of "reading the world."

Gendered Context of "Reading the World"

The character of welfare affects women's material situations, shapes gender relations, structures political conflict and participation, and contributes to the mobilization of specific interests and identities (Orloff, 1993). Recognizing the gendered domain of the welfare state is an important corrective to mainstream research and literature which, for the most part, has been genderblind (or gender-obscuring). The lack of gender analysis is evident by the very nature of social policies which exhibit a double standard of welfare provision for men: social insurance, which is more generous and popular; and women: public assistance, which stigmatizes and is less generous (see Skocpol, 1992; Gordon, 1994).

A lack of gender analysis is also evident in the mixed signals that women are now being sent. On the one hand, it is argued that women should be responsible for domestic duties and be supported by men. On the other hand, single women heads-of-households are told that they must now enter the paid workforce. Blaming women for being poor (e.g., not having a husband to support them and their children) or characterizing their status as being dependent is only a description of their financial circumstance, not an explanation for their poverty.

In addition, an analysis of poverty that begins and ends with family structure and marital status does not address the crux of the problem: the overwhelming number of poor single mothers who are now in poverty were poor before they became mothers (Amott, 1990). In any case, the argument seems to be that women's chances for moving out of poverty are tied to their attachment to a man (Scott, 1984; Wilson, 1987). This kind of thinking is evident when we examine the language used when discussing welfare policies. The first few sentences of the PRWORA are illustrative:

- Marriage is the foundation of a successful society
- Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interests of its children
- Promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is integral to successful child rearing and the well-being of children (110 STAT.2105)

These statements clearly reflect misgivings about social reproduction among the poor: that families headed by women are weak and disorganized, if not dysfunctional. Rather than focus on the institution of marriage, we argue that self-sufficiency, as sought after by this newest welfare reform, needs to be defined as self-determination within a "web of interdependencies" that would maximize the capacities for individual independence (Orloff, 1993, p. 320).

It follows that a key to self-determination is for poor single mothers to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to negotiate the changing system of welfare-to-work in order to determine which resources, options, and alternatives are available and to select those which are optimal for them and their families.

The central question thus becomes, what kind of knowledge do women need to be able to successfully transition between welfare and work? Further, what kind of knowledge do women need to be successful in the world of work?

Traditional definitions of literacy center around having the skills to read, write and do calculations (McLaren, 1988). However, simply emphasizing the functional aspects of literacy, in which the student passively receives information from the teacher, ignores basic tenets of successful adult basic education, which tend to stress the importance of dialogue between teacher and student (Vella, 1994). Dialogue helps students see the links between literacy, context and meaning, or as Heath (1993: 36) has said, it helps them to make the "essential leap . . . from knowing what the words say to understanding what they mean."

Critical literacy helps women make sense of what they are learning by grounding it in the context of their daily lives. They are able to test that knowledge through action and reflection as they come to understand that both the word and the world are specially constructed. By strengthening these connections and enhancing the process of learning, acting, and reflecting, women can more clearly define the strengths they already have as well as the obstacles that hinder their efforts to move from welfare to work. The process of critical literacy serves to enable individuals to further develop the competencies necessary for critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making. In the ambiguous political and economic climate being created by changing welfare legislation, it is even more important that women be able to negotiate the worlds of work, family, and community while responding to opportunities as they materialize.

There is, however, an ever-widening gulf between recognition of the importance of critical literacy in transforming one's world and the task-oriented welfare regulations which focus directly on moving individuals off the welfare rolls and into the labor market. Sanctions, not critical thinking, hold sway. Training and education programs now play a limited role in the programmatic structure of welfare reform. As reported by an advocacy group in Mississippi, "[Governor Kirk] Fordice's position is that the only job training that welfare recipients need is a good alarm clock" (Sack, 1995, p. A-1).

Our argument calls attention to the missing links between the reality of a single mother's world and welfare policies. The following discussion outlines the Wisconsin initiative and offers a critique of various elements of the legislation as framed by the concept of critical literacy. We speak to these various components with the understanding that poor women have little choice but to respond to the welfare system that now states "the solution to single mothers' poverty is not the freedom to raise children but the medicine of work" (Backer, 1995, p. 400).

A New State Initiative: Wisconsin Works (W-2)

The welfare system as it now exists is now one of the root problems of the breakdown of the family which has caused the breakdown of the community. Set up originally to be a temporary program, the only real radical change that has been made to it has been to make it permanent. A system that doesn't support the family or encourage work and doesn't encourage personal responsibility is bound to fail." (Governor Tommy Thompson as cited in Eggers & O'Leary, 1995, p. 29)

In December, 1993, Wisconsin Governor Thompson signed into law a redesigned state welfare program. Calling for a replacement of welfare with work, the new legislation ends authorization for the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program within Wisconsin, effective January, 1, 1999. The philosophy of the program centers on the concept that work fulfills a basic need by connecting individuals to society and its values and that providing income without the need to work has isolated welfare recipients from the rest of society. The solution to these destructive influences is seen to be the rejoining of work and income. Proponents of W-2 state that this will be achieved through the consistent application of the following principles:

- For those who can work, only work should pay
- Everybody is able to work within their abilities
- W-2's reward system is designed to reinforce behavior that leads to independence and self-sufficiency
- W-2's objectives are best achieved by working with the most effective providers and by relying on market and performance mechanisms

- Policies should be judged by how well they strengthen the responsibility of both parents to care for their children
- W-2 will operate in ways that enhance the way communities support individual efforts to achieve self-sufficiency
- W-2 will provide only as much service as an eligible individual asks for or needs (Office of the Governor, Wisconsin, 1995).

The state initiative will provide cash assistance and supportive services only for those individuals involved in one of the following four work options as reflected in Table 1.

Listed in order of preference, the intent of the Self-Sufficiency Ladder is to assist individuals in "moving up" to the next level. As outlined by Wisconsin's Office of the Governor, (1995, pp. 6-7), the preferred option, Unsubsidized Employment, would guide participants to the "best available immediate job opportunity within the private sector." Matching personal capabilities with work options is preferred to "diverting [participants] to extended education and training programs."

The second category, Trial Jobs or Subsidized Employment, is seen as a way to help individuals transition to private employment; women meeting this criteria would be those who "enter W-2 with a willing attitude but without a work background." Community Service Jobs (CSJ), the third option, is for those individuals who need to practice the work habits and skills necessary to enter the private workforce. Women will be provided with "structured, meaningful work settings which will allow [them] to practice good work habits and learn skills which are readily transferrable to the private sector."

The last category, W-2 Transitions, is reserved for those individuals "who are unable to perform independent self-sustaining work even in a community service job." Individuals must participate in workshops and activities including "vocational rehabilitation and treatment" necessary to facilitate the move into private employment.

Eligible families are those consisting of custodial parents and their children age 18 or younger, who also have incomes below 115 percent of poverty and have low assets. Minor teenagers who become parents are not required to work but will be expected to remain in the homes of their parents and finish high school

Table 1

Movement Up the Self-Sufficiency Ladder

	<i>Basic Income Package</i>	<i>Likely Income</i>	<i>Weekly Work-Week</i>	<i>Program Time Limits</i>
Unsubsidized Employment	Market wage + food stamps + EITC	\$14,500.00 (post tax) and food stamps*	40 hrs/week standard	None
Trial Jobs	At least minimum wage + EITC + \$300 maximum wage subsidy to employer	\$12,000.00 (post tax) and food stamps*	40 hrs/week standard	3 months with an option for a 3 month extension per job; 24 months maximum
Community Service Jobs	\$555 cash grant + food stamps (no EITC)	\$6,660.00 and food stamps*	30 hrs/week standard; and up to 10 hrs/week in educational and training activities	6 months with an option for a 3 month extension per job; 24 months maximum
W-2 Transition	\$518 cash grant + food stamps (no EITC)	\$6,216.00 and food stamps*	28 hrs/week in work activities standard; and up to 12 hrs/week in educational and training activities	24 month limit; extensions permitted on a case-by-case basis with Department approval

* Food stamp allotments will be determined based on individual income level.

Source: Office of the Governor, Wisconsin (1996)

with the goal of employment immediately thereafter. The basic financial responsibility of supporting the minor parent and child will rest on the parents of the teen. Minor teenage parents who can not reside at home will be placed in a supervised living arrangement such as a foster family or a group home.

Supportive services such as child care, medical insurance, and transportation reimbursements are still in place. There is, however, a new twist; recipients are held liable for some portion of the cost of such services. First, subsidized child care will be available to all families with low-income or low-assets. All families will contribute to the cost of child care services calculated on an income sliding-scale. It is anticipated that increased demand will encourage new child care providers to enter the marketplace, ensuring that services will be available for all who need them in order to work. Existing categories of licensed and certified providers will remain, but added to these will be a new, less restrictive category of provisional child care.

Second, health care coverage will be available to all low-income families through a system of managed care. Families will be assessed a health care premium based on income. If an individual is eligible for employer-provided coverage, then such coverage must be accepted in lieu of the state policy.

The W-2 delivery system will be managed and operated by single agencies who will bid for the opportunity. In turn, the state will exercise its management responsibilities through performance contracts with these agencies. In fact, the entire tone of the social service delivery system has changed as evidenced by the welfare division having been transferred from the Department of Health and Human Services to the Department of Industry, Labor, and Human Relations. The intent is to replace "the automatic welfare check with a comprehensive package of work options, job training, health-care and child-care services, and even financial planning" (Thompson, 1996, p. 12).

Finally, child support payments will now go directly to the *working custodial parent* [*italics added for emphasis*]. As there is no longer an entitlement system in place, W-2 states that there is no need for these payments to offset the cost of providing cash assistance.

Discussion of the W-2 Initiative

The language of management and technical efficiency expressed within W-2 does not recognize the complexities of the lives of poor women and their families. The proposed programmatic solutions reflect a belief that rational and scientific interventions will solve the articulated problem of welfare dependency (Piven, 1995). Encouraging the work norm among single mothers is considered to be the answer to family decline and the growth of an isolated subculture or underclass (see Gilder, 1981; Murray, 1984; Mead, 1992). Society's collective responsibility for the poor has shifted to an enforcement of individual responsibility. The various components of W-2, in particular, the legislation's Self-Sufficiency Ladder, are directed toward assisting the individual welfare recipient to overcome structural impediments to employment, as opposed to addressing the structural barriers themselves (Bowen, Desimone, & McKay, 1995).

The intent of categorizing women by their job skills is so they may be assigned to the proper job category. To accomplish this, W-2 has created a different type of caseworker—an individual who is a skilled financial and employment advisor (FEP). This person's task is to commit state resources while providing advice and personal attention to women clients to ensure their upward mobility.

If the relationship between client and FEP develops effectively then, theoretically, so should the opportunity to move from denouncing a woman for her poverty to understanding her in terms of skills, abilities and experiences. Under such circumstances, caseworkers would work with women to develop the skills needed to negotiate the world of work, family, and community. Contradictions exist, however, because the elements of W-2 are not set within the context of single mothers' lives. Nor is there a recognition of the need for education and skills beyond those defined by traditional literacy (if that much). In the following discussion, we outline the conflict and barriers that will continue to prove problematic, and we suggest how introducing the concept of critical literacy into policies and programs might help ameliorate some of these concerns.

Employment as the Solution

The crux of W-2 is to place welfare recipients in a job—not necessarily a good job, or a satisfying job, or one on the first rung of the career ladder. Rather, any job will do. There is no emphasis on training or education, except during brief transitional periods. We are concerned that trial jobs will be exactly that; women will be funneled into low-wage jobs, with no benefits, and which will terminate in a few months. If the recipients are unable to find permanent employment at the end of this transitional phase, they will be labeled as failures. The time limits on welfare assistance would remain in place, whether a woman has been terminated from work or not.

There is no indication as to where these jobs are to be found. Although the legislation requires that the managing agency form a steering committee responsible for creating, and encouraging others to create, subsidized and on-the-job training jobs, this mandate is not likely to meet the massive demands for employment. It is estimated that through W-2, Wisconsin will move 53,700 former AFDC recipients into the labor market. An additional 2,000 new W-2 enrollees will be seeking work each month for the foreseeable future (W-2 Watch, 1995). Even if a comprehensive job creation program is put in place it is unlikely to be able to respond to the need within the time limits that welfare recipients will be facing. This is yet another example of how labor policies are not tied directly to social policies aimed at reducing poverty or the welfare of poor women (Kamerman, 1984; Bowen, Desimone, & McKay, 1995).

There is also little evidence that women will find jobs that will allow them to support themselves and their families. The types of jobs that unskilled and semi-skilled women are able to secure in the private marketplace not only fail to meet their basic needs, but do not lead to better jobs later on regardless of how diligently or how long women work at them. These jobs do not produce the necessary human capital (educational and occupational skill levels) nor the social capital (contacts) needed to obtain better jobs. Low-wage jobs often require work at odd hours, do not guarantee a reliable number of hours of work per week, and are subject to frequent layoffs (Spalter-Roth, Hartmann, &

Andrews, 1990; Edin, 1995). Research on single mothers' work histories reveals that many can recount varied experiences as they moved from one low-wage job to the other—seeking better wages, more hours, better benefits, more convenient transportation, better circumstances for child care—yet rarely, if ever, improving their earning level in the long term (Edin, 1995; Miranne, forthcoming).

In the changing welfare environment, there is no recognition of the strategies that welfare recipients employ to support their families. Initiatives such as W-2 see welfare and work as mutually exclusive, rather than understanding that while "dependent" on AFDC, women package income from welfare and wages because neither alone provides an adequate income (Spalter-Roth and Hartmann, 1993; Miranne, forthcoming). The result has been that welfare mothers support themselves and their children by putting together income from a multiple of sources. Women combine income from men (current or ex-husbands/partners), income from the market (wage labor), and income from the state (both means- and non-means tested). Not only does this strategy allow women to increase their families' economic well-being, it can result in a decreased dependency on only one source, thereby reducing the potential for exploitation.

Finally, W-2 does not recognize that work history patterns differ between women and men. Women face a complex mix of economic disadvantage in the labor market and a disproportionate responsibility for reproductive labor and caretaking—responsibilities that traditionally make up women's work (Baca Zinn, 1989; Sidel, 1986; Tickamyer, 1995–96). Responsibility for the caretaking role, and its ensuing interruptions in work history over a woman's lifecourse, can lead to poverty or exacerbate poverty conditions for low-income women (Glazer, 1990; Baines, Evans, & Neysmith, 1992; Kingston & O'Grady-Leshane, 1993). Even with record numbers of women entering the workforce, there is still the expectation that women will continue to provide care to their families and communities. We would argue that the newest welfare reform still implies this assumption. For example, if unmarried teenage mothers and their children are to remain at home, who will support them? The expectation is that the mothers of these young women will contribute what is needed, thus adding to the

financial, psychological, and emotional stresses that already exist within poor households.

Given the complexities of poor women's lives and the world of work, it would seem to their benefit (and society's) that they be encouraged to continue developing strategies of income packaging. In addition, women need to determine when and how they can attain the education and training needed to improve their chances of entering the labor market and excelling once there. Introducing critical literacy into the process of moving individuals from welfare to work would help sharpen their problem-solving and decision-making skills.

Education and Job Training

W-2 discounts the need for educational or training programs. Yet, education is a critical element affecting labor force participation. Women with more education have more human capital to invest in employment and are thus more likely to continue working once they have jobs. The one category in W-2's Self-Sufficiency Ladder that is geared toward job training is Community Service Jobs. These jobs, however, will pay only 75 percent of the minimum wage (currently \$3.86 an hour), with the difference in salary subsidized by food stamps. The intent behind the lower wage scale is to make these jobs unattractive enough so that participants are motivated to move up the job ladder as quickly as possible. The lack of adequate financial and educational support, however, will lead to individuals not being able to advance beyond low-paying community service jobs. Focusing on sanctions and penalties also does not address the gap between skills and job demands (see Burtless, 1995; Holzer, 1996). Many participants simply do not have the kinds of skills for jobs which would pay a living wage. Yet, there are no provisions which would enable participants to acquire adequate skills. These would include basic academic skills as well as those which help individuals develop problem-solving, decision-making, and leadership skills. In fact, the U.S. Department of Labor and the American Society for Training and Development have compiled the following list of basic skill groups that employers see as important (Hull, 1993):

- Knowing how to learn
- Reading, writing, and computation

- Listening and oral communication
- Creative thinking and problem solving
- Self-esteem, goal setting/motivation, and personal/career development
- Interpersonal skills, negotiation, and teamwork
- Organizational effectiveness and leadership

The basics of traditional literacy; reading, writing, and computation, are just one skill group among the seven listed. Job performance (and we would suggest even the image of employability) depend on workers acquiring this broad range of competencies—the elements of what we have been defining as critical literacy. If education and training programs are reduced by W-2, how can we expect poor single parents to meet the demands of the labor market? If those transitioning to work are not given the opportunities to develop the kind of critical literacy that employers increasingly see as important, then how can we expect them to succeed?

Time Limits

The time limits tied to the receipt of benefits (see Table 1) assume that all single parents are able to work full-time. Within the general population of married women with preschool children, however, only 60 percent are in the work force, and of all women who work, only two out of three work full-time (Ozawa, 1994). Why should we demand more of low-income single mothers than we do of other mothers? In addition, policy makers have not recognized that even without the imposition of a time limit, 48 percent of AFDC families no longer receive benefits after two years, and only 17 percent remain on the welfare rolls eight years or longer. The remaining 35 percent leave AFDC within three to seven years (Ozawa, 1994). It would appear that when presented with employment opportunities and adequate support services (primarily child care and transportation), the majority of single mothers will accept responsibility for paid employment and child rearing. Time limit sanctions will only negatively impact those individuals who need the additional time to gain the skills and training that will make them marketable. Instead of sanctions, giving these women the opportunity to develop and strengthen

the skills necessary for negotiating the complexities of this changing environment will be more successful in the long run.

Young Parents

W-2 has declared that, in the past, too many long-term welfare recipients started on welfare as teen parents. Thus under the new regulations, teen parents who are minors will not be allowed to set up their own households. They must live at home or with a legal guardian. For those who cannot live at home, three options will be available: live in a foster home, live in a group home, or as a last alternative, live in a supervised independent setting (Thompson, 1996).

There is no evidence that teenage girls become pregnant in order to receive welfare benefits. Once on AFDC, the birthrate among welfare recipients is lower than that for all women in the same age bracket (Ozawa, 1994; Rank 1994). We need to seek elsewhere for the solution to the problem of teenage pregnancy and childbearing, such as in the improvement of public education. We know that teenage girls who feel they have reliable options before them (such as a good education, recreational activities, and/or a mentor) are less likely to become pregnant. W-2 does allow minor teenager parents to complete high school before they have to enter the workplace. Yet, it is expected that young parents must go to work immediately after graduation or lose all benefits. There is no encouragement for these individuals to seek further education including college, vocational, or technical training.

Teenage mothers are disadvantaged in the job market because they usually lack experience and training by virtue of their youth. Again, because of their age, these mothers will also have young children who require full-time care, a stumbling block for any mother trying to enter the labor market. Finally, family resources may become strained as these young mothers are most likely coming from impoverished backgrounds. Clearly, mothers who enter the work force with little training and minimal education will struggle to support their families at low-paying jobs with little chance for advancement. If younger mothers are encouraged to develop critical literacy skills above and beyond traditional training and education, they will be better prepared to identify those alternatives and options that will ensure a productive future.

Supportive Services

In order to concentrate on their work responsibilities, women must be assured that their children are receiving safe and adequate child care. In response, W-2 has loosened the criteria that providers need to meet in order to allow for a less rigid system of child care with the anticipation that there will be adequate subsidized child care facilities available. What is not understood, however, is that women need more than just a paid-for place for their child. They need child care that is easily accessible, is open when they need it to be (many of these new jobs will require shift work during a time of day when formal child care is not available), and that provides the care and nurturing they think is important for their child (Miranne and Young, 1995).

In regard to health care, W-2's requirement that an individual participate in a private employer's health care program may not be economically feasible. Insurance costs borne by employees can be quite high, especially for those working in smaller businesses. This is a problem already seen in the workplace; the implementation of W-2 will not change the private marketplace within the health care field. If the premiums are too expensive, single mothers will have no choice but to forego health insurance for themselves and their children. Yet, we know that access to health care is one of the major reasons that mothers opt to stay on welfare.

Creating the best alternatives for their families among the supportive services offered will take great skill on the part of these women as well as their caseworkers or FEPs. Discretion has been, and will continue to be, inherent in welfare service delivery, even in rule-bound systems such as W-2. How caseworkers respond to each client, and the level of individualization that occurs, will determine how readily women can move into the work arena. Since W-2 will provide only those services that clients ask for or need, then it is extremely important that these women in transition understand the system of benefits and be in a position to develop strategies that will provide them with the relevant benefits as their situations change.

Child Support

W-2 participants will still need to identify the fathers of their children as part of the eligibility process and the non-custodial

parent will still be required to pay child support. Although W-2 will allow women to keep 100 percent of their child support there are still inherent problems. On the surface, telling women that they can keep all their child support would appear to be a step toward financial independence. We know, however, that many women would prefer to make their own child support arrangements without the benefit of formal intervention. Mothers know that the relationships between the fathers of their children and the extended network of kin that he brings is often more important than the few dollars collected in child support (Miranne, forthcoming). State intervention may mar this relationship.

Another important issue not addressed by W-2 is the pervasive violence in many of these women's lives. Mulroy (1995) suggests that single women parenting alone are employing a survival strategy within violent neighborhoods where the "streets are taking the men" (p. 73). Therefore, telling women to marry or stay married may not be to their best advantage. Breaking off from a violent relationship should be seen as a responsible act by women who flee situations that are dangerous for themselves and their children. These types of survival strategies, which allow women to maximize resources for themselves and their children, should be encouraged. As a process, critical literacy provides women with the opportunity to sharpen decision-making skills (which include determining available options and alternatives) both during and after their transition from welfare to work.

Language of Sanction

W-2 states that participants can be deemed ineligible for a component of the Act if they voluntarily leave appropriate employment or training without good cause or are discharged from a position. Again, there is an assumption that women will put their job responsibilities before all else. Within their own everyday lives, women weigh alternatives and choose options that are not part of the work process as defined by W-2. Despite the pressures of their daily lives, women remain committed to their children. They do not see themselves as providers struggling to be parents, rather, they see themselves as mothers, and within that context, they decide to be providers (Schein, 1995, p. 42). If the processes of critical literacy were recognized by policy-

makers and administrators, the types of sanctions outlined in W-2 would not be in place. Rather, the multiplicities of women's lives would be respected and women would be provided the means to accomplish their goals. More education and training would necessarily be a part of this process.

In addition, the time limits assigned to each employment category as seen in the Self-Sufficiency Ladder indicate that policy makers assume that the threat of being dropped from W-2 if "upward mobility" is not accomplished is all that stands in the way of regular employment. If women are given the proper training and supportive services, they will seek employment on their own and there would be no need for sanctions to be put in place.

Conclusion

Just stop for a moment sometime today and think about how much of your daily life is organized around work—how much of your family life, how much of your social life, not to mention your work life. Think about the extent to which you are defined by the friends you have at work, by the sense that you do a good job, by the regularity of the paycheck. (President William Clinton as cited in Backer, 1995, p. 379)

This statement by the President reflects an ideology of work that is not part of the world of poor single mothers and their families. These women do not organize their lives simply around paid employment—it is but one component of their complex world. Mandating that they place work at the center of their existence, with no discussion of the varied aspects of their lives, forces women to bear the costs of their myriad responsibilities alone and in silence. There is no effort to develop a critical literacy that will strengthen their abilities. By arguing for the short-term fix, is W-2 adding to the social and economic costs of reproducing the next generation of productive workers?

We have argued that welfare policies should facilitate critical literacy among women. Just as there are financial and employment planners who are to be put in place to work one-on-one with participants, so can there be others who would focus on helping women maximize the options and alternatives available

to them within this transitional period from welfare to work. The women most impacted by welfare reform are the ones who have the clearest, and perhaps the only, accurate understanding of their needs and priorities. Working from this knowledge base, and learning how to critically evaluate and exploit their environment, should allow women to enhance their own resources. In the end, is that not what welfare reform is meant to achieve? Thus, rather than focusing on policy from the top down, we would be better served to look at welfare reform from the bottom up.

We have also outlined concerns about the various components of W-2. The structural problems of our society's economy, polity, and social organization negatively impact single mothers and their families living in poverty. Yet, welfare reform initiatives such as W-2 are driven by the belief that "putting the employable poor to work is a problem in social administration, not social reform" (Mead, 1992, p. 171). Hardly anywhere in the W-2 legislation is there a commitment to education and training, and nowhere is there a recognition of the need for critical literacy. Yet, only with critical literacy will participants be able to fully realize and exercise their options and alternatives—getting women "off of welfare" is but one step. To be truly successful, W-2 and similar state initiatives will need to assist women in learning life-time skills that impact all aspects of their lives. Poor women must be allowed the opportunity to determine their own life circumstances and to have their efforts validated and recognized. Only then will we begin to see women leaving welfare assistance behind.

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